The Fourth Church Pulpit

DIVINE PURSUIT

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John M. Buchanan

Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restless. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of an empty and meaningless life ... when our indifference, our weakness, our lack of direction and compassion have become intolerable ... when despair destroys all joy and courage. Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness and it is though a voice were saying: "You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now: perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now: perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted."

Paul Tillich
The Shaking of the Foundations

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DIVINE PURSUIT

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Scripture:
Psalm 139:1-12
Luke 15:1-10

"Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?"
Psalm 139:7 (NRSV)

Has it ever occurred to you to run away – from life, from your overwhelming commitments, from the fate you have been handed, from yourself? Has it ever occurred to you to run away from God?

John Carmody was a theologian who wrote eloquently and honestly. His last books were about his struggle with terminal illness. In a little volume, psalms for times of trouble, he had written about the experience of being "battered" by chemotherapy and radiation, slumping on a stool in a hospital examining room "feeling black and blue and green" and asking,

> "what more can I do? Is it not enough
> that I am dying? In the end we flee from ourselves ..." [p. 111]
>
> "Where can I go from your spirit?" the psalmist asked. "Or where can I flee from your presence?"

It is a stunningly beautiful psalm. "If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me,..."

What an intriguing suggestion that there are times when you and I run away – even from God. And what a radically different idea of God that is! God – the seeker: God – the one who pursues to the ends of the earth and beyond: God – the one from whom there is no ultimate escape: God – light in the darkness: God – strong arm to hold us and keep us from falling: God – the "Hound of Heaven," Francis Thompson wrote in a famous poem, whose footsteps follow and track down the one fleeing in final beautiful laughter.

What a stunningly different idea of God! From the farthest reaches of time, whatever God is conjured up by the fertile imagination of human beings is shrouded in primal mystery, surrounded by celestial glory, protected by legions of angels. From the beginning, human imagination has proposed a God of utter moral purity who may condescend to have to do with human beings insofar as they placate God's utter holiness and purity, make themselves acceptable by offering sacrifices on the altar: cows and goats and lambs and pigeons and doves and even their own firstborn; or make themselves clean for God's untainted holiness by purifying and purging in ritual baths, scourging, fasting, denying their own needs and desires, staring into the sun, sitting on stone pillars in the desert, starving, lying on beds of nails, retreating to caves and monasteries to

live celibate, lonely lives. From the beginning, human imagination has come up with a remote deity, hidden in mystery, separated from mortals by absolute purity, God on a mighty throne, or judgment seat, arms tightly folded, fists clenched, waiting for the supplicant to do whatever the religionists say must be done to break the ice, to induce a divine smile, or at least a little less wrath, to get a little piece of salvation, grace, heaven.

You may recognize that God in much religion, ancient and modern. Israel never quite grew out of that God, nor has contemporary Christianity. My guess is that this God, or something very close, lives somewhere deep in your spirit, too.

What a radical notion, that God doesn't wait for us to do anything, to turn around and come home – but comes after us. What a radical idea that God follows us wherever we go, particularly when our going has something to do with a flight from God. Nobody much thinks of God in those terms.

Once upon a time there was a man who did. Jesus not only thought that way about God, he lived his life intentionally to reflect that radical theology.

It happened fairly regularly, apparently. He ate with tax collectors and sinners. He included in his version of the human community those his religion excluded and who were regarded as utterly lost. They – sinners, tax collectors – had not done what it is necessary for any person to do to break the ice with God. Sinners were essentially poor people who were too busy trying to figure out where the next meal was coming from to pay attention to the rules and rituals of religion. Tax collectors had sold their souls to the hated Gentile occupying army, extracting taxes from their countrymen to pay for Rome's extravagant building projects, Herod's palaces, fortresses and temples.

That is who Jesus ate with – in a culture that assigns great significance to table fellowship. In that culture, to break bread with another is to extend honor, peace, friendship. It is not hopping up on a stool at a fast food establishment and in a crowd of hundreds, eating in absolute isolation. hospitality is theologically, sociologically and politically loaded.

At the conclusion of a tour of a school in a Palestinian refugee camp outside of Bethlehem two weeks ago, running about an hour behind our very ambitious schedule, we were met by an elderly Palestinian woman in a long dark garment, holding a tray of small glasses of a steaming, dark liquid which turned out to be a very sweet tea. The temperature in the room was at least 90 degrees. Hot, sweet tea was not what we had in mind. What we had in mind was finding our bus and getting out of there! The first few Americans said a polite "no thank you," and walked on. I observed that the look on her face changed from passivity to disappointment to hurt. Something more than hot tea was being rejected. Fortunately, some of our members understood what was going on and said, "of course; how lovely, how very thoughtful – we'd all love some, wouldn't we?" And she beamed and extended the tray and something important transpired between a Palestinian Muslim woman and a group of American Presbyterians.

All the New Testament scholars agree that this is not casual, coincidental behavior on Jesus' part. In sitting at table with sinners and tax collectors he is intentionally acting out the reality of God's love, demonstrating God's hope for humankind, and modeling how God's people ought to be acting.

But not everybody likes what he is doing. It challenges them – their deepest religious convictions, their social and political assumptions. Pharisees and Scribes grumble because of the company Jesus is keeping. And so he tells them a sequence of wonderful stories …

- About a shepherd who leaves ninety-nine sheep in the wilderness to go after one who is lost and who, when he finds the lost sheep, lays it on his shoulders, physically carries it home to the village and calls the community together for a celebration.

- About a woman who has ten coins and when she loses one, turns her house inside out until she finds it. She too calls in the neighbors for a celebration.

Familiar, beloved stories, but actually quite peculiar. For one thing, shepherds are among the lost … women are second-class citizens at best. He seems to be leading up to something and now the Pharisees and Scribes are squirming and getting angry. Notice the surprising internal action. The lost sheep isn't responsible for getting lost. The coin didn't get itself lost.

Both are found, recovered, restored – in the sheep's case, physically borne on the strong shoulders of the shepherd, physically carried by one who is absolutely determined and will not stop searching until what is lost is found.

"There is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents," Jesus tells the squirming Pharisees and Scribes. What do you suppose that meant? The lost sheep didn't repent. It was found. The coin didn't turn up on its own volition. It was found by a relentlessly determined woman. Jesus is proposing here a radical notion of God which was brand new, and still is: God the pursuer, God the ardent lover: God, not the mystical presence waiting for us to break the silence, but precisely the one who comes after us, hunts us down, finds us and brings us home. And it is a brand new notion of what it means to be faithful to that God: a notion that has a lot less to do with purity and more to do with inclusive love than anyone thought, or for that matter wants to think today.

Donald McCullogh, in a new book, The trivialization of God, tells a wonderful story about John Mackie, head of the Church of Scotland after the Second World War, and one of the leaders of the new World Council of Churches who was visiting a remote part of the Balkan peninsula in the days after the war to see how World Council relief money was being spent. His traveling companions were two members of a "rather severe and pious denomination."

"One afternoon Dr. Mackie and the two other clergymen went to call on the Orthodox priest in a small Greek village. The priest was overjoyed to see them and eager to pay his respects. Immediately he produced a box of Havana cigars, a great treasure in those days, and offered each of his guests a cigar. Dr. Mackie took one, bit the end off, lit it, puffed and said how good it was. The other two looked horrified and said, 'we don't smoke.'

"Realizing he had somehow offended the two, the priest was anxious to make amends. So he excused himself and reappeared in a few minutes with a bottle of his choicest wine. Dr. Mackie sniffed it like a connoisseur, sipped it and praised its quality, and asked for another glass. His companions drew themselves back even more noticeably and said, 'No, thank you. We don't drink.'

"Later, making their way out of the village the two pious clergymen turned on Dr. Mackie. 'Do you mean to tell us that you are the head of the Church of Scotland and an officer in the World Church Council and you smoke and drink?' Mackie's Scottish temper got the best of him. 'No, damn it, I don't smoke or drink,' he said. But somebody had to act like a Christian back there.'" [p. 36-37]

Jesus reached out to include in his circle of companions and friends precisely those who organized, institutional religion decided were lost and therefore expendable and excluded. As the churches in our land define themselves for ministry and mission in the next century, his strong challenge, his rebuke to well-meaning guardians of purity, morality and orthodoxy, one hopes, will be part of the discussion.

When the pharisees and Scribes looked at their world and the people around them, they saw two types – the righteous and the sinners. When Jesus looked around he saw the lost and the found.

It is a powerful and relevant cultural motif – lostness is. There are a lot of ways to become lost. The great theologian, Paul Tillich, taught that deep inside all of us is an aversion to God. The God who is really God. "Who wants to be known fully?" Tillich asked. Who wants a God from whom we have no secrets, who is present everywhere we go and who sees into the recesses of our hearts?

"It is safe to say that a (person) who has never tried to flee God has never experienced the God who is really God." [The Shaking of the Foundations, p. 41]

The philosopher, Frederick Nietzsche, despised Christianity, but at least he understood the issues. In one of his novels, God is murdered: human beings can't stand God. God knows too much, sees too much.

Modern author, Annie Dillard agrees – "the soul may ask God for anything: for God's presence, for wisdom ... or you may ask God in the words of the shopkeepers' little sign, that he not go away mad, but just go away." [Teaching a Stone to Talk, p. 97]

A little closer to home, one of the most consistent themes in our culture's music, rock and rap, is isolation, loneliness, alienation, lostness. In Diane Keaton's fine new movie "Unstrung Heroes," a little boy is growing up trying to cope with an eccentric father who is obsessed with science, has no time for religion, which he calls a crutch, and spends his life in the attic working on inventions and never connects with his son, and his beautiful and understanding mother who is

dying. He runs away to two very peculiar bachelor uncles who live like hermits in a cluttered cheap hotel and the first thing that happens is the Jewish prayer of thanksgiving at the table. Before long, he is being Bar Mitzvah'd.

Sometimes lostness happens because somebody else did the losing. For more than 200 years this culture has told black people, black men particularly, that they were not part of the community. For two centuries laws and custom and tradition have excluded a portion of our population on the basis of race. part of the result we are now reaping is loss of identity, lack of self-esteem and confidence, anger, rage and an epidemic of meaningless violence. Louis Farrakan's attitudes about women, his racist rhetoric, and anti-Semitism are deplorable, but if a million black men gather in Washington and find something of their identity, it is a redemptive moment, full of promise.

Sometimes lostness occurs when parents lose their children: in neglect, physical violence, sexual abuse: or when adult men abuse women – leaving victims with physical scars and deep spiritual wounds that feel like aloneness and lostness.

And always illness, pain, suffering are experienced as personal isolation. Professor Carmody, who died just last week, wrote,

"The child comes to me crying,
holding out his arms to be lifted up.
How often I come to you that way,
though I don't even realize it.
I feel like an orphan out on my own … alone."

We prim and proper Presbyterians sometimes find the idea of being held by God a little too physical, too personal, too intimate. I am reminded, however, that the shepherd in Jesus' story, when he finds the lost sheep, doesn't simply invite it to return, doesn't plead, cajole, urge – but simply, elegantly, stoops down and picks it us and places it on his shoulders and carries it home.

There are strongly physical images in that marvelous Psalm of being hemmed in – surrounded, held in God's arms, of God's right hand holding us fast which means, literally, an arm around us, holding us up, steadying our step, keeping us from falling.

I was sitting in my favorite chair, listening to one of my favorite singers, a wonderful woman I have loved for 35 years. She sings jazz, blues, improvisation, big band. her name is Nancy Wilson. When Nancy Wilson sings about love she gets my attention.

So I was listening to "Your Arms of Love," which I have heard many times, the last song on a compact disc with the simple title, "Love, Nancy." But for some reason, I listened closely to the lyrics.

"Please hold me in your arms, You know the truth, I don't have the right to come and say, please hold me in your arms of love."

So far, so good!

"Your arms of love, relieve the pain, your arms I need again."

Who doesn't like to hear that?

"So if you will, look past my faults, take hold of my hand. Please hold me in your arms."

And then she sang,

"I know he can. He knows the facts and somehow still understands. God wants to hold you in his arms."

And as the background jazz singers modulate gorgeously from what I thought was a sensuous torch song into Gospel, Nancy sings,

"The love of Jesus … I want you to hold me, Jesus … hold me in your arms."

In some way, in some place in your heart, at some stage in the journey of your life, you and I experience lostness, experience the truth of the ancient prophet – "all we like sheep have gone astray."

Whatever that is for you, in whatever way you are lost, because of your race, because of something someone did to you, because of something you have done, because of something you perceive that you are and society confirms that judgment cruelly, if you are in some way on the run – from life, from yourself, from God, please know that there is one who searches for you, there are strong arms to hold you, there is light for your darkness, there is one who will seek you, and find you, and bring you home at last.

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Dear God, how often we have strayed, from our own aspirations for ourselves, from the love and expectations of others, from your confidence in us and call to us. We give thanks for your patience, for your pursuit of us, and for the blessed promise that there is nowhere we can flee that removes us from your love. Amen.